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Signal From Syria

President Hafez al-Assad of Syria has informed Washington through a visiting American congressman of his efforts to release Western hostages believed held by Lebanese extremists—a signal to President Reagan of potentially deep significance in the tangled Middle East.

Assad told Rep. George O'Brien (R-Ill.) last week that he had personally asked a top Iranian official to "exert pressure" on Shiite fundamentalist groups in Lebanon for the release of seven American and four French hostages. The information was rocketed back to the State Department, where it has been read with profound interest.

Officials here noted the surprising ease with which O'Brien, a seven-term congressman with no foreign policy background, penetrated the inner sanctum of the powerful Syrian ruler in an unpublicized plea for a constituent held captive. They say it showed that Assad wants to do business with the United States—but not with an administration that he views as hostile to Syria.

Because of that hostility, Assad almost never grants interviews to U.S. Ambassador William Eagleton. Nor has the Syrian leader been accessible to American diplomats since Secretary of State George Shultz ignored him and the power he disposes in the Middle East in trying to arrange withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 1983.

O'Brien was no emissary of the administration—a point he repeatedly made to Syrian officials—when he used the August congressional recess to slip quietly into Damascus. He came as a special pleader without hostility for Syria. The congressman's message for Shultz is that if the Reagan administration started treating Syria in the same fashion, Assad might discover some way to free the remaining hostages.

He was pleading for the Rev. Martin Jenco, whose Joliet home is in

O'Brien's district. Jenco was seized by unknown captors Jan. 8 in Beirut, where he headed Catholic Relief Services. Never before had Assad revealed to this country that he has directly lobbied his Iranian allies to "exert pressure" on the Lebanese wing of the Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist Islamic movement, a movement much feared by Assad himself.

O'Brien's unexpected interview with Syria's strongman and his separate conversation with Vice President Halim Khaddam produced other revealing details for the United States.

Khaddam described the militant Shiite Hezbollah as being "like stone" in their hardness, knocking his knuckles on the corner of his desk in illustration. He told O'Brien that the Syrian government has contacts with the main Hezbollah groups and can converse with them easily. It is the smaller cliques of Islamic fanatics that, he said, even the Syrian intelligence

service has trouble identifying or talking to. That claim might be scoffed at by Washington's legions of Syria-haters, but O'Brien told us it had the ring of truth for him.

Although Assad avoided direct criticism of Reagan or Shultz, Khaddam said the Syrian government had been disappointed in the initial White House reaction after the TWA hostages were finally released last July 2.

Syria's role in helping arrange for their release was treated cavalierly, Khaddam told O'Brien. Speaking of Father Jenco and the other six Americans still held hostage in Lebanon, Khaddam said that "we are trying to help not because of the administration but simply for humanitarian reasons."

Without directly raising the issue, Khaddam implied that Israel has reneged on the unwritten, secret deal to release more than 700 Shiite Lebanese who had been transported (illegally, says the United States) from southern Lebanon to a prison in Israel.

More than 100 are still in jail.

O'Brien told Khaddam that "the people in my district" believed that "without Syria, the TWA hostages would never have gotten out." Khaddam responded that there was an immense difference between the TWA hijacking and the individual kidnapping of the hostages still held.

Whereas the Syrians knew the identity of the hijackers and the location of their hostages, the path to sure knowledge is slippery in the case of Jenco and the others. "We are not dealing with normal people," Khaddam said, "but with people for whom death is an ultimate victory."

O'Brien sees a desperate need for far more direct administration attention to Syria and disputes the idea that it would hurt the United States with Israel. It is now up to George Shultz whether the United States also rejects the conventional wisdom and reacts to the signal from Damascus.

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